TITLE
Co-constructed transnational learning in postgraduate research supervision: exploring issues of power and trust

AUTHOR
Price, Mark and Martin, Rachel

JOURNAL
African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning

DATE DEPOSITED
21 December 2021

ISSN 2521-0262 Print: African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning-Vol 5, Special Issue (1): (2021) APORTAL, VOL5, Special Issue 1, 2021

CO-CONSTRUCTED TRANSNATIONAL LEARNING IN POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH SUPERVISION: EXPLORING ISSUES OF POWER AND TRUST

*Rachel Martin and **Mark Price

*Mauritius Institute of Education & University of Brighton, UK

**St Mary's University, UK

Corresponding author: mark.price@stmarys.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper considers the challenges and affordances relating to shifts in supervisory encounters arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, within a transnational postgraduate student-tutor supervisory relationship. It explores particularly the co-constructional nature of transnational learning, reflecting on issues of power and trust, from masters to doctoral research in education practice.

Rachel and Mark worked together in a student-supervisor relationship, firstly on the *MA Education* and then on the *Doctorate in Education (EdD)* programmes, jointly offered by the Mauritius Institute of Education and the University of Brighton, UK. Rachel's research considers narrative and autoethnographic inquiry into educational professionalism, agency and becoming and parallels Mark's own research interest and experience.

Our reflections were developed through a series of email exchanges and online discussions, theorised through meta-reflection and analysis. Informed by postcolonial perspectives, the paper notes that the complexity and inequalities of power distribution in such a transnational supervisory relationship are likely to be compounded through shifts to online only encounters. A call for a more rigorous exploration into this aspect of postgraduate research supervision is made, particularly in the context of international and transnational provision.

Key words: co-constructed narrative, postgraduate research supervision, professional agency, transnational learning

INTRODUCTION

Postgraduate supervision has received much attention in the literature worldwide (e.g. Daramola, 2021; Harwood and Petrić, 2019; Trowler, 2021). Such studies have shown, for example, that poor communication between supervisor and supervisee and lack of support, negatively affect progress, while mutual trust contributes to the success of the student. When the supervision is transnational or intercultural (Manathunga, 2014), with students and supervisors of different cultures working together, there are added challenges in terms of heightened power imbalances. Recently, with higher education being disrupted by COVID-19, research has emerged into the impact of the pandemic on postgraduate supervision (e.g. Suparman, 2021; Nash, 2021), showing that COVID-19 has intensified the existing challenges. However, there appears to be little that explicitly explores issues of power and trust in transnational supervisory relationships, contextualised in relation to the pandemic. This paper aims to address this and calls for further empirical research into these issues and their interrelationship.

Drawing upon a series of email exchanges and online meetings, we reflect on challenges and affordances relating to shifts in supervisory encounters arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, within a transnational postgraduate student-tutor supervisory relationship. From our respective positions as student and supervisor, we consider how issues of trust, power and transnational learning co-constructed prior to the pandemic, enabled us to navigate the shift to remote-only provision.

BACKGROUND

The partnership between the University of Brighton (UoB) a modern, civic British university, and Mauritius Institute of Education (MIE), a parastatal institution in the Global South, is one born from a position of postcolonialism, Mauritius being a former British colony, now an independent African state. MIEand UoB have worked collaboratively on postgraduate research-based programmes for over 20 years, with UoB *MA Education* and *Doctorate in Education (EdD)* awards offered annually to experienced Mauritian teachers and educational leaders. Leadership, teaching, supervision and administration of both programmes are shared between the two institutions, with UoB tutors, including Mark, making regular visits to MIE. Prior to COVID-19, only minimal use was made of remote teaching and supervision strategies.

Having worked together in a student-supervisor relationship, firstly on the MA, then on the EdD programmes at MIE, we posit that with the move to remote-only supervision arising from COVID-19, it is important to document such experiences,to help and support other postgraduate students and supervisors navigate the challenges of such relationships. We offer this reflective piece as a stimulus for further consideration of issues of trust and power in the context of transnational postgraduate supervision and the 'new- normal' of remote learning. Italicised text is taken from emails between us during May and June 2021, supported by further meta-reflection and theorisation on our evolving supervision process in context.

POWER, TRUST AND TRANSNATIONALISM

Rachel enrolled on the MA Education as this would provide the opportunity to study with a British university, whilst living and working in Mauritius. She welcomed the face-to-face contact with tutors the programme afforded, but was apprehensive, wondering whether she would be good enough, and how as a Mauritian student, she would be

regarded by tutors and a supervisor from the UK:

> Having previously studied issues of postcolonialism and neocolonialism, I was conscious of the cultural differences between our respective countries. I knew that you, and British universities generally, coming to Mauritius to teach us, could be seen as a perpetuation of educational, even cultural imperialism, considering especially that Mauritius is a former British colony. I realised there was an inherent power imbalance between you and me, as supervisor and supervisee. This made me insecure, afraid I would feel or be made to feel inferior and marginalised.

Rachel's initial concern about her post-colonial positioning is interesting as it brings to the fore issues of power in transnational supervision and perhaps a level of what Bhabha (1995) terms 'ambivalence', supported by Manathunga (2010) who argues that postcolonial theory can allow students and supervisors understand both the attractions and tensions that may occur in such intercultural postgraduate supervision.

These socio-cultural, quasi-colonial issues were compounded by age andgender differences, adding further complexity, Rachel being a younger Mauritian woman supervised by Mark, an older, white British man. Alam *et al.* (2013) note these added challenges in terms of power imbalances, where the supervisor and student differ in gender, culture and language. This aligns too with Nkoane (2013) who, in exploring the concept of hegemony in postgraduate supervision, shows how dominant discourses can elevate supervisors to positions of superiority while marginalizing students, and argues for an alternative, counter-hegemonic supervision that is more emancipatory for both the student and supervisor.

In our work together, we were both aware of such discourses. Mark had supervised postgraduate students before, both in the UK and in Mauritius, but had not always felt comfortable supervising Mauritian students. He was particularly aware that many of his assumptions about schools in Mauritius, policy and education generally, were based on Eurocentric norms and values (Ashcroft *et al*., 2000). Openly discussing such cultural bias with Rachel was key to building trust in the relationship:

> I was also aware of how many dimensions of education in the UK and Mauritius were similar, but perhaps differently situated and contextualised. When you were exploring issues of teacher agency for your dissertation, and I could see how these reflected issues common to both our contexts, this became clearer for me. This is when I felt most aware of how our supervision relationship was evolving – that we brought different experiences and perspectives to the relationship. Perhaps this was when we first developed a level of transnational understanding.

In differentiating between assimilationist and transcultural modes of supervision, Manathunga (2014) sees supervision as a 'contact zone', mediated by the power dynamics emerging from,and related to the histories of colonialism. It is clear in our work together that Rachel was not expected to assimilate Mark's culture and ways of being:

> You were approachable, you listened without judgment, while

> also supporting my own voice, my own agency. And with time, I became less insecure. Then as we moved to remote-only supervision, things were easier, as mutual trust and cultural sensitivity had already been established.

Rachel's perceptions changed as she progressed through the MA, and then moved on to the EdD. She developed a sensitivity too, to the challenges for Mark, who, working in a culturally-contrasting environment, knew he could be perceived as an outsider:

> I've often wondered how you were feeling when we were speaking Mauritian Kreol in class and you couldn't understand what we were saying. I would have found this so hard had I been in your place. I later realised that so many of our linguistic and cultural experiences had the potential for creating tension between us.

With time we were able to navigate these tensions. Mark was keen to learn about education in Mauritius – concerning Rachel's school, and current policy reforms, for example– but also in relation to broader aspects of society – the position of women and the ethnic composition of Mauritius. Knowing that as a supervisor, Mark wanted to understand her experience, helped Rachel build trust in him. She felt able to discuss with Mark issues such as professionalism, agency and neoliberalism, which go beyond national boundaries. This allowed us to bring cross-cultural experiences out into the open more. Instead of seeing our differences as problematic, we embraced their disruptiveness, and valued them as opportunities to learn from each other.

As our relationship continued to develop and we further explored issues of trust and power, we saw how they had the potential to be both replicated and challenged though our supervisory relationship. This deepening understanding of the layers of diverse social positionings and conscious and unconscious knowing (Grant, 2010), enabled us to maintain a commitment to professional becoming and further development of trust. This then helped us navigate the move to remote-only supervision more easily.

COVID-19 AND THE MOVE TO REMOTE-ONLY LEARNING

When COVID-19 locked us down, the shift to remote-only learning was accommodated relatively easily by the programme partnership. Mark and other UoB tutors were unable to travel to Mauritius as originally planned, but Microsoft Teams provided a means for teaching and learning to continue. Our supervisory relationship had become established and nurtured over time,through repeated face-to-face contact. Rachel, however, still took some time to adapt:

> Although the doctoral programme was already a blend of face-to-face contact, with some remote interaction and materials available online, the transition took some time. But you made it easier by maintaining contact through emails, and frequent encouragement. You reached out to me; you read and gave feedback on sections of draft assignments and offered support with online presentations. This helped me become confident in working with you remotely.

Mpungose (2020), researching South African universities, found that the provision of open-access resources can help with the challenges imposed by the move to remote-only learning. Cekiso *et al.* (2019) also proposed that supervisors

use email, SMS and WhatsApp so that students are assured of their availability and constant communication with them. Yet Mpungose (2020) argues that capacity building in the use of learningmanagement systems is still needed. UoB provided online resources and tutorials on the use of Microsoft Teams and other platforms, but for Rachel, the transition was still potentially problematic:

> The physical distance already meant that I felt I didn't quite belong to the university back in the UK. I couldn't meet people there, attend meetings or physically access books, many of which were not available in Mauritius. But the fact that you had previously come over to Mauritius regularly, shrunk the distance a little. So, when we moved to remote-only learning, I feared a resurgence of this distance and a loss of the connection we had built. It felt too sudden and I was not emotionally prepared for this.

Such challenges are common in students with the move to remote-only learning. A survey of eight universities in Sweden (Börgeson *et al.,* 2021) revealsthat apart from the use of diverse meeting platforms and more regular supervision, during COVID-19, students need to feel they have their supervisor's emotional support. Nash (2021) argues that COVID-19 has increased student anxiety about supervision and puts forward a model to help reduce such anxiety and depression.

In our case, Mark was conscious that by coming to Mauritius, he and other UoB tutors, were essentially bringing something of their university to the students. This was important for Mark, but he knew that he was taking something back from Mauritius too, but that with COVID-19, this exchange became disrupted:

> I was learning about how your experience as a research student in Mauritius was different to that of UK students, although there were similarities of course too. I felt as a tutor and your supervisor, it was important to reach out to you and other Mauritian students even more during the first lockdown.

Alemu (2020) argues that Western academics and knowledge are unsympathetic to non-Western concerns and priorities. From this perspective, there was the potential for Rachel's research experience and interests being seen as irrelevant or unimportant. We knew our work together was largely based on trust, and were aware of the danger of this trust not being sustained with the move to online supervision. Rachel notes:

> I missed the face-to-face sessions, where I would be able to meet you for tutorials, but the online collaboration worked well, largely because of the trust we had developed.

Mark too, reflected on his experience of evolving trust in thiscontext:

> Working with you taught me so much about being a supervisor, how this relationship evolves and how supervision has an 'ecological' dimension to its practice. I think this element of shared learning became more important for both of us as you grew in confidence. For me, this has been a hugely important to the transnational aspect of the collaborative learning process.

Even after we moved online, we remained open to learning from each other, and through working together, our understanding of issues of power and trust

in supervision deepened, especially in the context of the cultural differences between us. Rachel notes:

> Looking back now, I can say I never was positioned as the 'other' in this supervisory relationship. In fact, I felt it was more of a partnership than the authoritative and unequal relationship I had anticipated. I became more comfortable discussing issues such as oppression and discrimination with you than with a Mauritian, even if it was only through emails. We don't really talk openly about these things here and maybe I needed a more objective and detached ear. But of course, these are global issues too. I felt I could bring these increasingly to my studies and my research in general, including the development of this paper!

This level of trust and collaborative understanding of each other's position prior to the pandemic, enabled us to continue to work together effectively. We feel unsure though, that this would have been the case, had our relationship not hadsuch a secure base, and that the level of transnationality within doctoral studiesargued for by Rizvi (2010), would not have been possible. Indeed, we suspect that this transnationality is challenged immensely where such face-to-face learning and cultural sensitisation and exchange is not possible.

CONCLUSIONS

We share an orientation to narrative research and so developing a co-constructed, reflective piece such as this, aligns with our established professional perspectives and practices. We feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to work with, and learn from each other over a four-year period and feel the success of our supervisory relationship came through an evolving sense of trust and mutual regard. This has been born out of a willingness to explore issues of difference and power within the relationship, which in turn enhanced the potential for further transnational learning. We have doubts though, given the structural and cultural inequalities existingbetween us, that such exploration would have been possible had our initial contact been only through remote means.

We encourage wider reflection and examination of such supervisory relationships and how a commitment to furthering trust and shared understanding of issues of power and transnationality in supervision might be nurtured, particularly as remote learning now appears to have become the 'new normal'.

REFERENCES

Alam, F., Alam, Q., & Rasul, M. G. (2013). A Pilot Study on Postgraduate Supervision. *Procedia Engineering*, *56*, 875-881. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2013.03.210

Alemu, S. K. (2020). Transnational Mobility of Academics: Some Academic Impacts. *CEPS Journal*, *10*(2), 77-100. https://doi.org/10.26529/ceps j.464

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2000). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts*. London: Routledge.

Bhabha, H. (1995). *Location ofCulture.* London: Routledge.

Börgeson, E., Sotak, M., Kraft, J., Bagunu, G., Biörserud, C., & Lange, S. (2021). Challenges in PhD Education due to COVID-19 - Disrupted Supervision orBusiness as Usual: A Cross-

Sectional Survey of Swedish Biomedical Sciences Graduate Students. *BMC MedicalEducation*, *21*(1), 294-294. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-02727-3

Cekiso, M., Tshotsho, B., Masha, R., & Saziwa, T. (2019). Supervision Experiences of Postgraduate Research Students at one South African higher Education Institution. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *33*(3), 8-25. https://doi.org/10.20853/33-3-2913

Daramola, O. (2021). Lessons from Postgraduate Supervision in two African Universities:An Autoethnographic Account. *Education Sciences*, *11*(7), 345. https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/11/7/345

Grant, B.M. (2010). Negotiating the layered relations of supervision.In M. Walker & P. Thompson (Eds.) *The Routledge doctoral supervisor's companion: supporting effective research in education and the social science*, 88-105. Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Harwood, N., & Petrić, B. (2019). Helping International Master's Students Navigate Dissertation Supervision: Research-informed Discussion and Awareness-Raising Activities. *Journal of International Students*, *9*(1), 150-171. https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i1.276

Manathunga, C. (2010). Intercultural Postgraduate Supervision: Post-Colonial Explorations and Reflections on Southern Positionings. *New Zealand Annual Review of Education*, *20*, 5-23. https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v0i20.1568

Manathunga, C. (2014). *Intercultural Postgraduate Supervision: Reimagining Time, Place and Knowledge*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203111956

Mpungose, C. B. (2020). Emergent Transition from Face-to-Face to Online Learning in a South African University in the Context of the Coronavirus Pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, *7*(1). https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-020-00603-x

Nash, C. (2021). Improving Mentorship and Supervision during COVID-19 to Reduce Graduate Student Anxiety and Depression Aided by an Online Commercial Platform Narrative Research Group. *Challenges*, *12*(1), 11. http://dx.doi.org/10.3390/challe12010011

Nkoane, M. M. (2013). Creating Sustainable Postgraduate Supervision Learning Environments through Critical Emancipatory Research. *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, *9*(3), 393-400. https://doi.org/10.4102/td.v9i3.186

Rizvi, F. (2010) International students and doctoral studies in transnational spaces. In M. Walker & P. Thompson (Eds.) *The Routledge doctoral supervisor's companion: supporting effective research in education and the social sciences*

158-170. Abingdon, UK:Routledge.

Suparman, U. (2021). The Implementation of the Online Thesis Supervision during Pandemic Covid-19 at one of Graduate and Postgraduate Programs in Indonesia. *AKSARA*. *22*, 43-53. http://jurnal.fkip.unila.ac.id/index.php/aksara/article/view/21868

Trowler, P. (2021). Doctoral Supervision: Sharpening the Focus of the Practice Lens. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 1- 14. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2021.1937955

Zhang, Y., & Hyland, K. (2021). Advice-Giving, Power and Roles in Theses Supervisions. *Journal of Pragmatics*, *172*(1), 35-45. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2020.11.002